

The STeP Journal
Student Teacher Perspectives

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Editorial

TEAN presents this special issue of the STeP journal in association with Critical Publishing. I am very pleased first of all to invite Julia Morris, Director of Critical Publishing, to explain their Critical Writing Prize, where the papers in this special issue originated:

'The Critical Writing Prize 2017 is an annual prize, sponsored by Critical Publishing, awarded for the best student essay demonstrating a high level of critical thinking. The prize is open to any undergraduate or postgraduate student from the full range of social work and education related disciplines. Entries must be put forward and supported by a nominating university lecturer.

This year's entries were judged by Effie Maclellan, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Strathclyde. Professor Maclellan has written widely about critical thinking and is co-author of papers such as *Psychological knowledge for teaching critical thinking* and *What might count as evidence of critical thinking in teacher education courses?* Effie has summed up wonderfully the significance of critical thinking and writing for the education profession:

"The importance of critical writing (to evidence critical thinking) cannot be overstated as it is the prime intellectual tool we have which enables us to consider, evaluate and decide the accuracy and/or truth of what others tell us. It is therefore right that Higher Education promotes this capability. But the demands of critical writing are considerable: not only must the person synthesise a range of evidence and/or argument in defence of a point of view; the person must also analyse the chosen arguments and evidence (through considering whether they are relevant, sufficient, credible, or accurate)."

The 2017 competition was especially strong as we received a record number of high calibre essays. In recognition of this we are very pleased to be able to publish here with TEAN the shortlisted education entries (the runner up and winning entries appeared in the last issue of STeP – Vol 4, No 2). Effie Maclellan, said of the shortlisted essays:

"I was treated to a truly eclectic range of 'think pieces' which I would classify into three substantive topic areas – improving attainment in a curriculum area; the cultural and political specificity of the curriculum in different countries and the issues therein; the social and psychological events in families which may have implications for learners' development and progress."

I do hope you enjoy reading these essays as much as I did!

Julia Morris
September 2017

The papers in this special issue represent a wide range of critical thinking from student teachers:

Anna Bloor from the University of Derby critically explores the effect of volunteer tourism, financial aid and English language teaching on developing countries. She reports that although financial aid, volunteer tourism and English language teaching are often seen as positive contributions to the global south, in fact they are based on neo-colonial ideology and can be very damaging to the receiving country. However, the English language is currently seen by many as a way out of poverty, and a step in the direction of economic development. Denying the global south access to the English language would mirror the practice of many colonisers and would be more harmful than beneficial.

Vincent Byrne from the University of Wolverhampton presents an evaluation using the 'Cox model' as a framework to consider his evolving view of the teaching of English in the context of an inner-city grammar school for boys. He explains his conviction that by studying great texts of the past, students of today will develop the written and linguistic skills necessary to become effective and productive members of society in the future. Recognising the value of adopting an 'adult needs' approach will allow students to flourish in the other areas of the English curriculum.

Chiara Creates from Canterbury Christ Church University explored how Teaching Assistants (TAs) can use Bloom's Taxonomy to ask higher order questions to develop higher level thinking amongst Key Stage 2 pupils. She concludes that TAs must ask higher order questions to develop higher level thinking in order to advance the reading ability of pupils. However, this is only possible if schools take responsibility for explaining to TAs how to deliver questions requiring a variety of cognitive actions for higher level thinking and the reasoning behind why this is a preferential approach.

Fiona Gibson from Stranmillis University College, Belfast sought to highlight the potential benefits and drawbacks of the introduction of the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework into the Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007), specifically as a tool to enhance pupil project and topic work. She concludes that an 'infusion' approach of teaching both subject knowledge and critical thinking simultaneously has the most potential to enhance primary pupils' learning experiences. Teachers need to provide classrooms with 'thinking atmospheres' where explicitly talking about thinking and well planned activities that marry the development of content knowledge and thinking skills are actively pursued.

Livia Higgins from Durham University is concerned about the Arts. The Arts, she suggests, are marginalised in education because of a lack of fit with a dominant market-capitalist ideology, based around economic utility and measurement. To become acceptable, the Arts use its values and language, but becoming part of the culture means that the Arts appear to have little worth. Children then may mimic this view – this is even more likely to happen when children do not get to experience the Arts first hand. She advocates the Arts as an opportunity for individual and progressive change.

Katie Howard from the University of Oxford presents a literature review which explores the many ways in which a social constructivist model of learning and teaching may enhance students' motivation to learn a second language. She posits that a collaborative MFL classroom that seeks to raise students' motivation is a challenging yet worthy aspiration for the language teacher. Creating a learning environment in which learners are not only willing but eager to communicate, and where second language production is normative, will, she feels, inevitably lead to higher levels of motivation among students and greater participation in language learning.

Michael Priestley from Durham University discusses the problems, tensions and paradoxes inherent in the neoliberal philosophy of education. In particular, he highlights two moral objections, fairness and corruption, to English literature curricula and assessment reforms. He discusses the pressures on schools to become entrepreneurial market enterprises and fears an ultimate sacrifice of self-understanding from literary education to be replaced by a core knowledge base of information. Faced with government rhetoric, it becomes impossible to think in alternative terms and Michael concludes that our only resistance is to insist on speaking a different language of education.

Our final paper of the issue is from Jennifer Swann, Stranmillis University College, Belfast. Jennifer considers the nature, incidence and impact on children of separation and divorce in the context of the Primary School. Even though some argue it is a private family matter, the contact that teachers have with pupils places them in an ideal position to provide support through this difficult time. Jennifer proposes proactive and reactive strategies that schools can employ to prepare children with the resilience to cope with and overcome these traumatic events.

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